

# *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*

## **Biblical Strategies for Avoiding and Escaping Temptation**

**A Message Offered by  
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*[I]f you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.*

*1 Corinthians 10:12-13 NIV*

*If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.*

*Matthew 5:30 NRSV*

Maybe you couldn't resist the shocking headline, either.

## *Hiker Cuts Off Own Arm to Survive*

*By Scott Willoughby for Mountainzone.com*



*May 2, 2003-- With no water and ... little hope of survival, Aspen mountaineer Aron Ralston, age 27, used a Leatherman-style pocketknife to amputate his own arm and free himself from a boulder weighing more than 800 pounds that fell and*

*trapped him for five days in a remote desert canyon in eastern Utah. Pinned in a 3-foot wide slot canyon*



*near the Maze District of Canyonlands National Park south of Moab, Utah, Ralston cut through his own arm below the elbow Thursday morning, applying a tourniquet and administering first aid before rigging anchors and fixing a rope to rappel to the bottom of Blue John Canyon and hiking out to meet rescuers.*

*Ralston had been hiking alone when the boulder fell and pinned his right arm as he was moving through the narrow slot last Saturday afternoon. Ralston told rescuers that on Thursday morning he realized he would not survive unless he took drastic action. He had run out of water on Tuesday.*

*Search efforts that had begun Wednesday evening yielded no signs of the hiker until he walked out of the canyon with two other hikers at about 3 p.m. Thursday. Ralston was [flown] to Allen Memorial Hospital in Moab where he was stabilized before transport to [a hospital in] Grand Junction, Colo., for surgery.*

Despite the gruesome details, Ralston's story has a happy ending.



Seven and a half years later he is hiking, climbing, and skiing once again. He lost an arm but saved his life. A movie about his time in captivity, *127 Hours*, has just come out. Better yet, read his autobiography, aptly entitled, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place* (Atria Books, 2004).

We can learn a lot from Ralston's experience—not about exotic things like do-it-yourself surgery--but about something that each of us experiences every day: temptation.

There's a temptation for everyone. I've got mine; you've got yours. There's the temptation to overeat, to drink to excess, to steal, to lie, to take the easy way out. Some of us have a hard time resisting the urge to fill every moment of our lives with noise and activity. Some of us can't say no to a bargain, even when it is leading us into terrible debt. Some of us pretend that Internet pornography isn't really hurting anyone. Some of us are tempted to think that perfection is achievable and we'll keep pushing ourselves and others mercilessly, no matter the cost. Some of us work way too hard, because we think we have to prove ourselves. The truth is that in all these things we're simply listening to Sirens luring us to the rocks. Whatever the particular set of temptations *you* face, we *all* need to recognize the dangers of temptation before it's too late. Some of us are already trapped underneath half-ton boulders and we don't have any idea how we're going to get out.

**Ralston's ordeal reminds us that accidents can happen to *anyone* at *anytime* in *anyplace*. So can temptation.**

Ralston was a strong and experienced hiker in a relatively familiar and safe area, and he *still* got trapped. It's an old adage in the woods that it's when we're feeling most confident that we're in the most danger. It's true for Christ-followers as well. St. Paul warned, "if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" *No one* is beyond temptation's reach. If Satan tempted Jesus, you've got to know he has plans for you and me, too. Don't be embarrassed or surprised by temptation; assume that it's everywhere.

**We can often avoid trouble by planning for it.**

Even a tenderfoot Scout knows that the best way to avoid a tragic accident is to be prepared for one. But Ralston broke some of the cardinal rules of backwoods travel. He was hiking alone. He didn't even tell anyone where he was going. Second, he didn't bring water or matches in case he had to stay out overnight in an emergency. Ralston, a veteran outdoorsman, nearly died because of these rookie mistakes.

No matter how long we've been at it, Christ-followers need to be prepared for temptation, too. I know men and women in business who make it a practice to make sure others know where they're going and with whom so that there's always accountability and little possibility for impropriety.

*Don't let temptation get a foothold.* If spending is a problem, cut up the credit cards. If you're eyes are prone to wander, get Internet blocking software. When you struggle with a particular temptation, tell someone else about it. Just like a fungus thrives in the dark, temptation's power grows when we keep it secret. Tell another person what you're dealing with and you'll weaken that temptation's grip on you. And long before you feel yourself slipping choose a person you can call who would be willing to come and pull you out of a tempting situation.

**Just because it looks harmless doesn't mean it's safe.**

When Ralston first saw the boulder that trapped him, he thought it looked innocent enough. He'd climbed thousands of them just like it and never got into trouble before. It's the same way with the object of our temptations. They don't look like they're going to be our downfall. To Adam and Eve the apple looked harmless—"pleasing to the eye and good to eat." [Genesis 3:6] In the end that apple was their downfall, wasn't it? One more drink, one more deal, one more fling—it doesn't seem harmful at the time.

Just like Ralston couldn't imagine that that rock would eventually cost him his hand and nearly his life, we don't see how a flirtation at the office could lead to events that will cost us our marriage. When we're working late we can't see that we're slowly losing our child's respect and affection. When we fudge the accounting, we don't see that we're gambling our future and our freedom. We need to learn to count the full cost of sin before it starts.

One of the exercises I sometimes do with engaged couples is have them tell each other how *they* would feel if they found out the other person was having an affair. The couples squirm as I explain the unpleasant task to them, but I force them to do it anyway. I want each partner to remember for decades to come that they've been warned: even if *they* think a "fling" is harmless, their partner is going to pay a high price, and eventually they will, too. Too often we underestimate the cost of yielding to temptation and forget that failure affects not just ourselves, but the people closest to us as well.

**We can't expect others to save us from temptation.**

If Ralston had waited for a search party to find him, he would almost certainly have died of dehydration. Too often we think that a knight in shining armor will ride up on a noble steed and rescue us from the situations we get ourselves into. We hope a pill or a procedure will save us from work or eating habits that are destroying our health. We imagine that some miraculous financial windfall will lift us out of debt. But the chance of that happening is awfully small; in the meantime you and I drift closer and closer to disaster. Ralston knew that he was going to have to take the first courageous step. We also have to take the initiative to escape temptation. Join a support group. Tell a friend that you need help. When we do everything in our power to escape, people will join us in our effort. They want to help.

**The more we try to escape temptation on our own, *alone*, the more stuck we get.**

One of the ways Ralston tried to save himself in the early hours was by chipping away at the boulder in the area nearest his trapped arm. But each time even a tiny gap opened up, the giant rock just rotated down and settled on his arm even more securely. When we try to fight temptation with our own power, alone, we often find ourselves even more caught up in its snare. We need God's help to break the cycle.

Ralston prayed intermittently throughout his ordeal. It was on day six, when he was so dehydrated that his kidneys were shutting down, when he had already taped his Last Will and Testament on a pocket video recorder, that he heard God's answer to those prayers. In an interview right after his escape Ralston explained how God revealed to him how to sever his arm. Pain wasn't the problem—most of the nerves were already dead by that time. The bones were the issue. Even his Leatherman multi-purpose tool wasn't up to the job. Then it dawned on him that he could simply break them. Within 45 minutes, he was free. God made the difference.

**There's always a way out of temptation.**

One of the lies that the Devil tells us when we're caught in temptation is that we're *hopelessly* stuck, and there's *nothing* we can do about it. But God always provides a way out. We may not *like* the way out, but it's there, and with God's help we'll take it, no matter the cost.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said something that sounds pretty harsh. It's our second lesson today. "If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole

body to go into hell.” [Matthew 5:30 NRSV] I never appreciated the logic of that passage until I heard Ralston’s story. As precious as his hand was to him—his *right* hand, by the way, and he was right-handed—he knew that if he didn’t escape he was going to lose much more than that hand. We need to have that same attitude with temptation. The price of escaping temptation always seems high until we consider what will happen if we *don’t* escape. I’ve never regretted escaping temptation, but I *have* regretted *not* running when I had the chance. Better to cut and run than linger and die.

**Escaping temptation is incredibly rewarding.**

Ralston literally thanks God for his experience in the desert. In those 127 hours without water, food, or shelter, he learned what and who is really important to him. He can look in the mirror today, see his scarred body, and say: “I may have made a terrible mistake, but I still like what I see.”



Let me be clear. I’m not saying that escaping temptation is easy. I’m saying that it’s worth whatever the price because there’s something about overcoming temptation that changes us and prepares us for something better. Consider Joseph and how effective he was as a leader *after* he had successfully avoided an affair with Potiphar’s wife. Consider how 40-days of temptation in the desert prepared Jesus for his life’s work. We often think of avoiding temptation only in terms of what we’ll have to give up and not what we’ll gain. But it says in the Bible:

*Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.*

*James 1:12 NRSV*

With great victory comes great rewards—maybe not in this life, but certainly in the next.

As you think about Ralston's story and your own, consider these questions

- What temptations are you facing or are you likely to face in your life?
- Have you talked to God about those temptations?
- What steps can you take to deal with them before they deal with you?

And if you're caught up in temptation right now, you may feel terribly embarrassed and ashamed. You might think that you're the only one in this Sanctuary who's got an 800-lb secret. But you're not. And there is hope. The power of God working in God's people is greater than anything that's trapping you. Pornography, addiction, perfectionism, greed—God is bigger than all of them. You can get out from under that rock. Ask God to give you the courage, strength, the vision to do what you need to do, and then do it. God made a way for Aron Ralston; God will make a way for you. Amen.

## *Sermon Notes*

### **Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Biblical Strategies for Avoiding and Escaping Temptation**

Accidents can happen to *anyone* at \_\_\_\_\_ in \_\_\_\_\_. So can temptation.

We can often avoid trouble by \_\_\_\_\_ for it.

Just because it looks \_\_\_\_\_ doesn't mean it's safe.

We can't expect \_\_\_\_\_ to save us from temptation.

The more we try to escape temptation on our own, \_\_\_\_\_, the more stuck we get.

There's always a \_\_\_\_\_ of temptation.

Escaping temptation is \_\_\_\_\_.

Questions for further thought:

- What temptations are you facing or are you likely to face in your life?
- Have you talked to God about those temptations? Why not do it today before you get trapped?

- What additional steps can you take to deal with them before they deal with you? Consider telling a trusted friend or joining a support group.

*If you'd like to learn more strategies for dealing with temptation, check out Rick Warren's The Purpose Driven Life, pp. 201-216.*

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